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background notes

Laos

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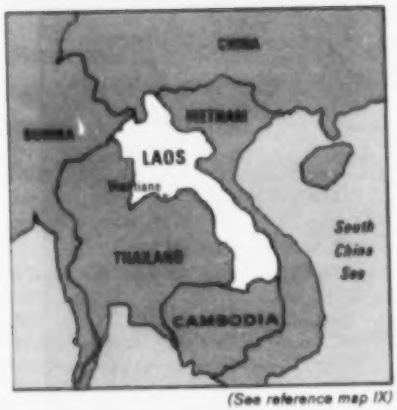

(See reference map IX)

Official Name: Lao People's Democratic Republic

PROFILE

People

Nationality: *Noun and adjective*—Lao (sing. and pl.). **Population:** 3.6 million (1985). **Annual growth rate:** 2.9%. **Density:** 15.2/sq. km. (39/sq. mi.). **Ethnic groups:** Lao 48%, tribal Thai 14%, Sino-Tibetan tribes, including the Hmong (Meo) and Yao 13%, Mon-Khmer tribes 25%, Vietnamese and Chinese less than 1%. **Religions:** Buddhism, indigenous beliefs. **Languages:** Lao (official), French. **Education:** *Literacy*—41% (government claims 60% among persons aged 15–45). **Health:** *Infant mortality rate*—126/1,000. *Life expectancy*—46 yrs. **Work force** (1.5 million): *Agriculture*—75%. *Industry*—6%.

Geography

Area: 236,804 sq. km. (91,430 sq. mi.); smaller than Oregon. *Capital*—Vientiane (pop. est. 120,000). *Other cities*—Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, Pakse, Thakhek. **Terrain:** Rugged mountains, dense jungle, plateaus. **Climate:** Tropical monsoon.

Government

Type: Communist.

Branches: *Executive*—president (head of state); Chairman, Council of Ministers (prime minister and head of government); 84-member Cabinet (including vice ministers). *Legislative*—Supreme People's Assembly. *Judicial*—mixture of regular and "people's courts," the latter for security cases.

Political party: Lao People's Revolutionary Party (only legal party).

Administrative subdivisions: In 1983, the number of provinces was increased from 13 to, reportedly, 17. Information has been published on only 16 of these. Vientiane municipality may be the 17th "province."

Central government budget (1982): 16.1 billion kip; *Expenditures*—104 billion kip.

Flag: A red band at the top and bottom with a larger blue band between them, on which is centered a large white circle.

National Day: December 2.

Economy

GNP (1985 est.): $1.8 billion at the commercial exchange rate; $160 million at the free market rate. **Per capita income:** $500 at the commercial exchange rate; $45 at the free market rate.

Natural resources: Tin, timber, gypsum, hydroelectric power.

Agriculture (72% of GNP): *Products*—rice, corn, tobacco, coffee, cotton.

Industry (8% of GNP): *Types*—tin and gypsum mining, lumber, textiles, construction.

Trade: *Exports*—$48 million (1985 est.): chiefly hydroelectric power and timber; also coffee and tin. *Major markets*—Thailand, Eastern Europe, USSR. *Imports*—$163 million (1985 est.): foodstuffs, petroleum, machinery, manufactured goods. *Major suppliers*—Thailand, Singapore, Eastern Europe, USSR.

Foreign debt (1984): $412 million (70% owed to socialist countries).

Official exchange rates (Dec. 1983): *Intragovernmental*—10 kip = US$1. *Commercial*—34.65 kip = US$1. *Noncommercial* (i.e., for organizations resident in Laos)—108 kip = US$1. *Inward remittances*—270 kip = US$1. **Unofficial "free market" rate:** 380–420 kip = US$1.

Fiscal year: July 1–June 30.

Membership in International Organizations

UN and some of its specialized and related agencies, including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), FAO, ICAO, IDA, IFAD, ILO, ITU, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UPU, WHO, WMO; Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (observer), Nonaligned Movement, Group of 77, Asian Development Bank, Colombo Plan, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Interparliamentary Union, Interim Mekong Committee, World Federation of Trade Unions.

READEX FICHE

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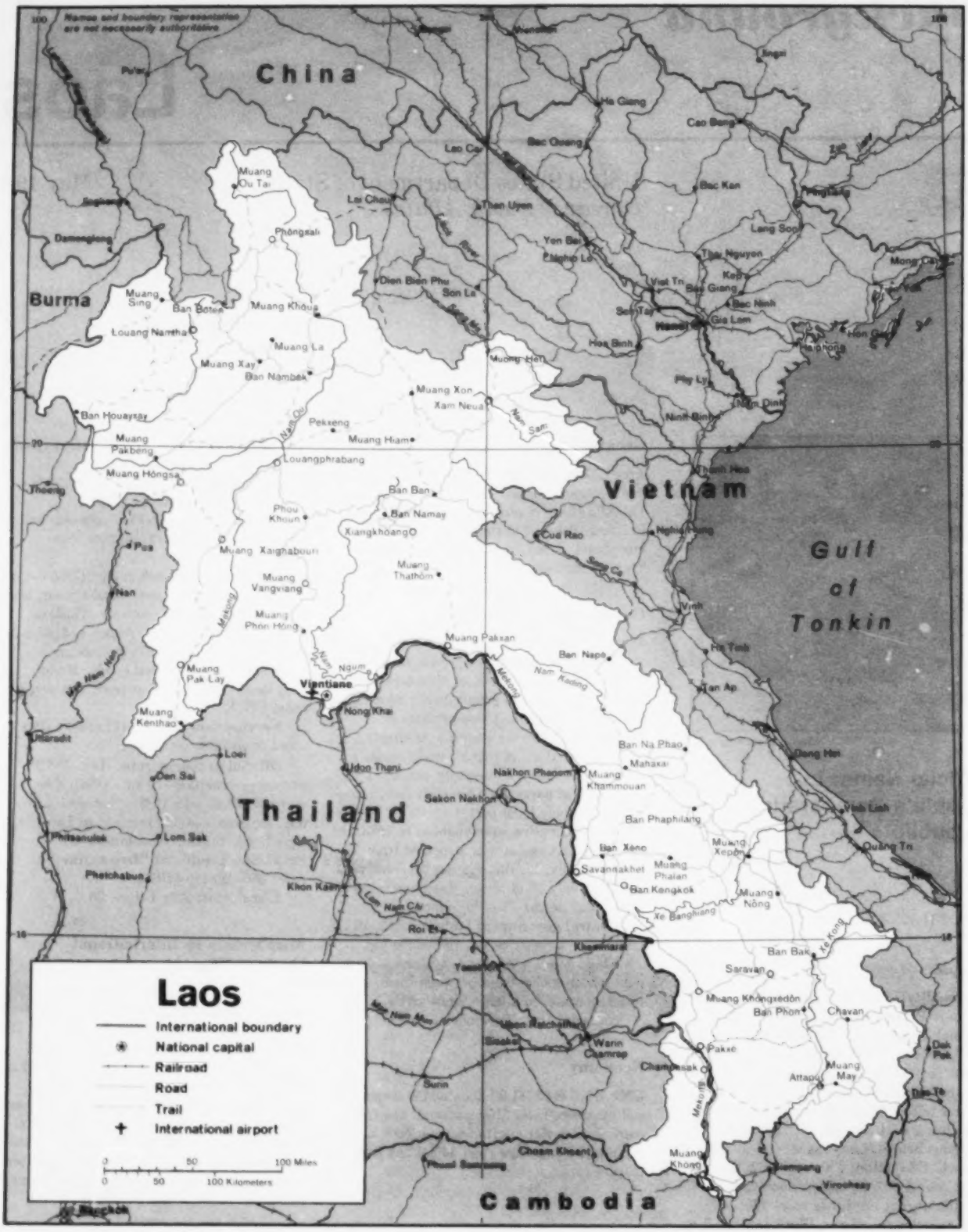
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Nghia Dang
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Muang Vangviang
Muang Thathôm
Muang Phon Hong
Muang Pakxan
Ban Nape
Ha Tinh
Vinh
Muang Pak Lay
Vientiane
Nong Khai
Tan Ap
Muang Kenthao
Ban Na Phao
Dong Hoi
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Virocheay
Bangkok

GEOGRAPHY

Laos is a landlocked country on the Indochinese Peninsula. It is dominated by dense jungle and rugged mountains, some of which rise more than 2,700 meters (9,000 ft.) above sea level. The dominant mountain chain, forming nearly the entire eastern frontier of Laos, also forms the watershed from which tributary streams drain the high plateaus and lowlands before flowing into the Mekong.

The climate is monsoonal; heavy rains from May through September taper off, and a cooler, comparatively drier season lasts through January. From February through April, the country is hot and dry. Temperatures in Vientiane normally range between 14°C (57°F) and 34°C (93°F) during the year. Humidity is high most of the year.

PEOPLE

The population is estimated at about 3.6 million, spread unevenly across the country. Most of the people live in the valleys of the Mekong and its tributaries. Vientiane, the capital and largest city, has about 200,000 residents.

Just under half of the people are ethnic Lao, the principal lowland inhabitants and politically and culturally dominant group. The Lao are descended from the Thai people, who migrated southward from China in the 13th century. Mountain tribes of Sino-Tibetan (Hmong, Yao, Aka, and Lahu) and Thai ethnolinguistic heritage are found in northern Laos. In the central and southern mountains, Mon-Khmer tribes predominate. There are also Vietnamese and Chinese minorities, particularly in the towns, although most have left since 1975. Widely diverse origins, customs, languages, and traditions exist among these minorities.

The predominant religion is Theravada Buddhism. Animism is common, however, particularly among the mountain tribes. Buddhism and spirit worship coexist easily. Most members of the small Christian community (primarily Roman Catholic) have left since 1975.

The official and dominant language is Lao, a tonal language of the Thai linguistic group. French usage, once common in government and commerce, has declined with the departure of many former government officials. To some extent, Lao is *lingua franca* among the tribal minorities. Many tribal languages or dialects do not have a written form.

HISTORY

Recent archeological discoveries in Southeast Asia have provoked increased interest and reassessment of the region and its place in Asian history. The ancient culture that flourished along the upper Mekong River had made basic advances in agriculture, pottery, metallurgy, and the polishing of stone tools by 3000 B.C. These people also spread their culture north into China and southeastward into Indonesia, the Philippines, and even to Australia. The numerically dominant Lao people began entering present-day Laos before A.D. 1000 from southern China. This migration accelerated after the Mongol destruction of their Kingdom of Yunnan in 1253.

The first recorded history of the Lao begins with King Fa Ngum—by legend, the 23d successor of Khoun Lo—who first united Laos in 1353. He established his capital at Luang Prabang and ruled a kingdom called Lan Xang (literally, "million elephants") that covered much of present-day Thailand as well as Laos. Fa Ngum also established Buddhism as the state religion. Beginning in the 16th century, Lan Xang entered a period of decline caused by dynastic struggles and conflicts with Burma, Siam (now Thailand), Vietnam, and the Khmer Kingdom. By the 18th century, Siamese and Vietnamese kingdoms were competing for control of Laos.

In the 19th century, the Siamese dominated much of what is now Laos and divided it into principalities centered on Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak. Late in the century, they were supplanted by the French, who already controlled present-day Vietnam. In 1899, France established protectorates and direct rule over all of the principalities, and Laos became part of French Indochina. The Franco-Siamese treaty of 1907 defined the present Lao boundary with Thailand.

In World War II, the Japanese occupied French Indochina and extended their control to all of the country, inducing King Sisavang Vong of Luang Prabang to declare his independence from France in 1945, just before Japan's defeat. In September 1945, Vientiane and Champassak united with Luang Prabang to form the new Kingdom of Laos. The king was overthrown shortly afterward by the Free Lao (Lao Issara) anti-French movement, but in April 1946 he was enthroned as a constitutional monarch after accepting the Lao Issara constitution. French troops reoccupied Vientiane and Luang Prabang in May and in August 1946 recognized Lao autonomy following elections to a constituent assembly. A new constitution took effect in 1947. Many Lao Issara leaders went into exile in Thailand.

France formally recognized the independence of Laos within the French Union on July 19, 1949, and Laos remained a member of the French Union until 1953.

The wartime Free Lao movement, organized to obtain independence from France, split in 1949. The communist faction, or Pathet Lao, under the tutelage of Vietnamese communists, established the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF). The most prominent LPF leader was Prince Souphanouvong, half brother to longtime Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma. Actual control of the LPF was in the hands of men such as Kaysone Phomvihan and Nouhak Phoumsavan, who formed the clandestine communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 1955 after the breakup of the Indochinese Communist Party into national parties.

The 1954 Geneva agreements provided for the regrouping of LPF and Viet Minh forces in the two northern Lao provinces pending a political settlement. From 1954 until 1957, pro-Western governments held power. The first coalition government, the Government of National Union, led by Souvanna Phouma, was formed in 1957, but it collapsed in 1958 with the imprisonment of Prince Souphanouvong and other LPF leaders by the government. A pro-Western regime took over the Royal Lao Government. The LPF insurgency resumed after 1959, when Souphanouvong and other leaders escaped from prison.

In 1960, Kong Le, a paratroop captain, seized Vientiane in a coup and demanded formation of a neutralist government to end the fighting. Kong Le and the neutralist government, again under Souvanna Phouma, were driven from Vientiane later in the year by rightist forces under Gen. Phoumi Nosovan, whereupon an alliance was formed with the LPF. By early 1961, the LPF, with North Vietnamese military support, threatened to take over the whole country. U.S. military advisers and supplies were sent to aid the Royal Army.

Further Information

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In May 1961, a 14-nation conference convened in Geneva to address the issue of Laos, continuing until July 1962. The 1962 Geneva agreement provided international guarantees for the independence and neutrality of Laos and required all foreign military personnel, with the exception of the small French training mission, to leave the country. The Provisional Government of National Union was formed, with Souvanna Phouma as prime minister and with Phoumi Nosovan and Souphanouvong as deputy prime ministers. U.S. military advisers were withdrawn; however, only a handful of the thousands of North Vietnamese troops in Laos returned to their country.

Lao politics remained unstable but essentially unchanged through the 1960s. The LPF ceased cooperating with the government in 1964, and fighting intensified against the neutralists and rightists. The tripartite form of government was maintained with LPF ministers in Vientiane. The North Vietnamese remained in Laos and expanded the area under their control, which they used as a supply route to South Vietnam (the "Ho Chi Minh Trail"). In response, the United States began a massive program of military assistance to the Royal Lao Government and the bombing of the North Vietnamese transport routes through Laos.

In 1972, the Lao communists publicly proclaimed the existence of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). A new coalition, with communist participation, and a cease-fire were arranged in 1973, but the political struggle between the communists, neutralists, and rightists continued. The collapse of Saigon and Phnom Penh in April 1975 hastened the decline of the coalition. On December 2, 1975, the monarchy was abolished, and the communist Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) was established.

The new regime proclaimed its alignment with Vietnam and other communist countries and stated its intention to participate in "nonaligned" councils. Many citizens, fearful of life in a communist-controlled state, fled to Thailand.

The new government set about transforming Laos into a "socialist state." The government undertook broad security measures, including the control of all communications media and the arrest and incarceration of thousands of members of the previous government and military in remote prison camps called "reeducation camps." Many of those initially arrested have been released, and while there were no reports in 1985 of individuals removed for "reeducation," many leaders of the former Royal Lao Government remain in detention. The government, also in cooperation with the Vietnamese forces in Laos, launched a military campaign intended to control dissident elements, notably Hmong (Meo) tribespeople who had long resisted Vietnamese and Lao communists from their mountain redoubts. Since 1975, some Hmong have been forcibly resettled in lowland areas of Laos, while many thousands of others have fled to Thailand as refugees. Charges that chemical weapons were used against Hmong villages have been supported in the past by material evidence. Chemical attacks in Laos continue to be reported, but recent reports have not been verified by analysis.

Deteriorating economic conditions and government attempts to enforce rigorous political control measures have prompted an exodus of lowland Lao as well as Hmong tribespeople. Estimates show that about 10% of the Lao population have sought refugee status abroad since 1975. Most have gone to northeast Thailand. The rate of refugee departures has decreased in recent years and, since May 1980, more than 3,000 Lao refugees have voluntarily returned to Laos under the auspices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. It is believed that several thousand more Lao informally repatriated themselves in 1982–85. As of the end of 1985, 138,000 Lao refugees had been resettled in the United States.

Despite campaigns by the Lao People's Army and about 50,000 Vietnamese troops, a low-level insurgency continues against the government. The resistance, weak and divided into many factions, does not pose a threat to the LPDR.

GOVERNMENT

The only legal political party is the Marxist-Leninist Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). The titular head of state is President Souphanouvong. Real power, however, rests with Chairman of the Council of Ministers Kaysone Phomvihan, who is also the party's secretary general.

Since 1983 the country reportedly has been divided into 17 provinces, which are subdivided into districts, cantons, and villages. Only 16 provinces are known by name. It is possible that the Vientiane municipality is the 17th "province."

Principal Government Officials

President—Souphanouvong
Chairman, Council of Ministers—Kaysone Phomvihan
Vice Chairman—Nouhak Phoumsavan
Vice Chairman and Foreign Minister—Phoun Sipaseuth
Lao Charge d'Affaires, a.i. in Washington, D.C.—Bounkeut Sangsomsak
Lao Permanent Representative to the United Nations—Kithong Vongsai

Laos maintains an embassy in the United States at 2222 S Street NW., Washington, D.C. 20008 (tel. 202-332-6416).

That Luang Monument. Vientiane's main Buddhist shrine.

ECONOMY

Laos is extremely underdeveloped, with most of its limited resources underexploited and unsurveyed. It is further handicapped by an inadequate internal transportation system and isolation from the sea. Although an estimated 85% of the population engages in subsistence agriculture, less than 10% of the land area is for agricultural use. These basic economic problems are partly attributable to 20 years of warfare. The Lao Government permits a private sector, but the LPDR emphasizes development through socialism with improvement in agriculture and transportation as stated priorities. The government uses incentives to promote collectivization of agriculture; earlier attempts at forced collectivization have been abandoned. Although state stores exist, most retail trade remains in private hands. The past 2 years have witnessed increased government efforts to control the small private sector and direct its efforts toward the nation's socialist goals.

In the past, Laos had to import considerable amounts of rice and other foods from Thailand. The LPDR Government has, as its goal, self-sufficiency through increased agricultural production. Although the 1984 harvest was short of Laos' needs, harvests in 1985 and 1986 appeared adequate.

Forests cover about two-thirds of the country. About half of this land has commercial possibilities, if the cost and difficulties of transportation can be met. Tin production could provide a small, continuing source of sorely needed foreign exchange. The Nam Ngum Dam (north of Vientiane), financed and constructed before the communist takeover with the assistance of an international consortium, is a major source of electricity. Only a small portion is used to meet the needs of the Vientiane area; the rest is exported to Thailand and is the country's principal earner of foreign exchange. Recent surveys indicate large deposits of potash and magnesium in addition to the deposits of coal, iron, and gypsum that have long been reported. Many Lao exports are bartered with Eastern socialist countries in return for industrial imports.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Since the inauguration of the new regime in December 1975, Laos has maintained a close relationship with Vietnam, described by the Lao and Vietnamese as a "special relationship" and formalized in a "friendship and cooperation treaty."

During the open hostilities between Cambodia and Vietnam in 1978, Laos maintained correct relations with Cambodia but publicly endorsed Vietnam's plan for peace. Laos condemned the Pol Pot regime of Cambodia only after that government had been driven out of Phnom Penh in early January 1979 by invading Vietnamese forces and replaced by a Vietnamese-installed regime under Heng Samrin. Laos was among the first to recognize the new regime established.

Lao "solidarity" with Vietnam and the Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia was stressed at a summit of Indochinese leaders in Vientiane in February 1983, the first such meeting. At the summit, the independence of the three states was reiterated, but plans were announced for greater cooperation. Laos also has close relations with the Soviet Union and most of the communist states of Eastern Europe. It is an observer at the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, the Soviet-bloc economic organization.

As Laos' principal means of access to the sea and primary trading partner, Thailand is a major concern for Lao foreign policymakers. During 1984 and much of 1985, Lao-Thai relations suffered because of a dispute over three villages along a poorly marked section of their common border. Each government

Travel Notes

At present, the Lao Government does not grant tourist visas to US citizens. Individuals have been able to visit Laos only as part of a group or delegation traveling for a specific purpose and usually sponsored by an organization or individual in Laos. A few US journalists have obtained visas in the past year. US citizens of Lao origin who have obtained visas to visit relatives in Laos should be aware of the potential risk their possible dual nationality poses.

Climate and clothing: Lightweight, washable cotton or cotton-blend clothes are suitable in Laos' warm, tropical climate. Bring rainwear for the rainy season, and, between December and February, a sweater or coat.

Customs: A valid Lao visa and cholera inoculation certificate are required for entry. All foreigners except Thai citizens must enter and depart Laos via Vientiane's Wattay Airport unless special permission to enter elsewhere is obtained before arrival.

Health: Medical and dental facilities and medicines are extremely limited. Community health services, including basic programs such as waste disposal, are inadequate by US standards. Water is not potable. Eating in the few Vientiane restaurants is relatively safe; select well-cooked foods, and drink bottled beverages.

Telecommunications: Overseas telephone service is available only between 7 am and 10 pm (local time) and is unreliable. Connections between the United States and Laos are often poor and difficult to manage. Telegraph service is slow and expensive. Laos is 12 hours ahead of eastern standard time.

Lao National Radio generally broadcasts in Lao but also broadcasts news in English, French, and other languages. Limited television broadcasting began in December 1983, mainly of programs from the USSR. Thai television can be received in border areas.

Transportation: Laos has no railroads, and public transportation in Vientiane is poor and unreliable. Taxis are available, but there are no meters or fixed rates. Traffic is haphazard and dangerous for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. Foreigners may not go beyond Vientiane city limits without government permission.

Vientiane is served by four international airlines: Thai Airways, Air Vietnam, Lao Aviation, and Aeroflot (USSR). Flights connect Vientiane to Bangkok, Rangoon, Hanoi, and (via several stops) Moscow. Bangkok is the nearest city served by US carrier.

has also accused the other of supporting antigovernment insurgencies.

Laos maintained close relations with China from 1975 through 1978 but, in early 1979, expressed public support for the Vietnamese-installed Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia and criticized China's invasion of Vietnam. Subsequently, Laos requested the withdrawal of all Chinese aid technicians. Sino-Lao relations deteriorated markedly as a result and have remained strained since. Laos has occasionally accused China of border provocations.

U.S.-LAO RELATIONS

U.S.-Lao relations deteriorated sharply in 1975, after government-inspired mobs attacked U.S. installations. The last U.S. Ambassador left in 1975. The United States maintains a small embassy in Laos, and Laos maintains a small embassy in Washington, D.C., both headed by charges d'affaires.

No U.S. economic or military assistance programs exist in Laos, and U.S. legislation prohibited most forms of development assistance for Laos until 1985. The United States supplied emergency food assistance to Laos in 1978 and again in 1984 to help meet a food shortage. The United States also has twice responded with emergency medical assistance to help the Lao people deal with health problems.

In 1978, the Lao Government gave its first positive response to the long-stated U.S. concern about U.S. military personnel missing in Laos by turning over several sets of remains, one of which was positively identified as a U.S. serviceman. In 1982, it received a private U.S. delegation from the National League of POW/MIA Families to discuss prisoner-of-war/missing-in-action (POW/MIA) matters.

Despite major foreign policy differences, both governments agreed in 1982 to work to improve bilateral relations on the basis of concrete steps by each side. The United States has stressed that progress in accounting for the 556 U.S. servicemen still unaccounted for in Laos from the Vietnam war era will be the principal measure of Lao sincerity in improving relations. Important progress has been achieved. In February 1985, a joint Lao-U.S. team excavated the site in southern Laos where a U.S. AC-130 plane had crashed in 1972—the first such excavation in Indochina since 1975. As a result of the cooperation shown by Laos during the excavation, the United States was able to positively identify the remains of all 13 servicemen missing from that crash. In February 1986, there was a joint excavation of another AC-130 crash site from which 14 servicemen are missing.

For its part, the United States has taken steps to improve relations by supporting loans to Laos by the Asian Development Bank (the United States previously abstained on such loans). In 1985, the United States determined that Laos' cooperation on the POW/MIA issue demonstrated the Lao Government's commitment to continuing cooperation and asked the U.S. Congress to delete Laos from a list of countries specifically prohibited from receiving most forms of U.S. assistance. Congress agreed with the request in December 1985.

Principal U.S. Officials

Charge d'Affaires, a.i.—Theresa A. Tull
Political Officer—Frederick Shoup
Economic/Consular Officer—Lisa Taylor

The U.S. Embassy in Laos is located on Rue Bartholomie, Vientiane (tel. 22-20). ■

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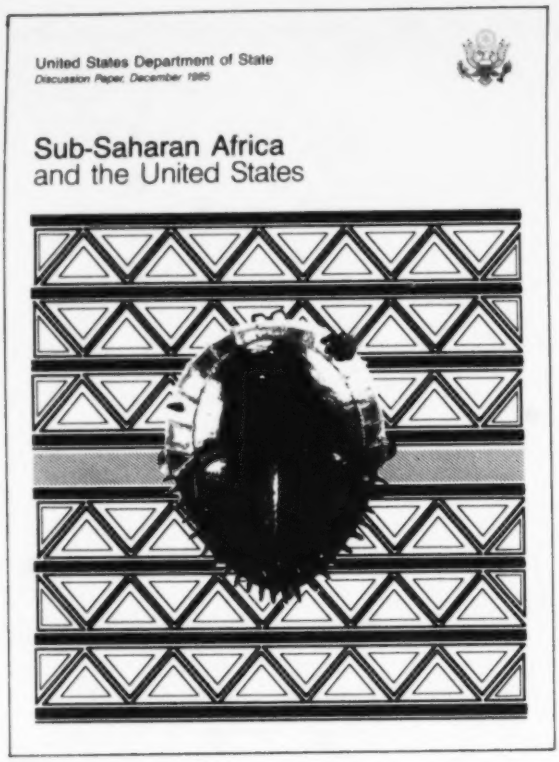

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